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## Henry James's Literary Theory and Criticism

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THERE IS an extreme divergence of opinion, even among presumably sympathetic critics, about the stature of Henry James as a critic. T. S. Eliot considers Henry James “emphatically not a successful *literary critic*. His criticism of books and writers is feeble. . . . Henry was not a literary critic.” Eliot recognizes that James, in his novels, is a fine critic of persons but denies him access to ideas. In Eliot’s paradoxical language, “he had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it.”<sup>1</sup> On the other hand Percy Lubbock in *The Craft of Fiction* pronounces James “the novelist who carried his research into the theory of the art further than any other—the only real *scholar* in the art,”<sup>2</sup> while Morris Roberts in a little book on *Henry James’s Criticism* declares that “no critic has ever gone more deeply into the philosophy of art.”<sup>3</sup> R. P. Blackmur, finally, praises James’s *Prefaces* to the New York edition of his novels as “the most sustained and I think the most eloquent and original piece of literary criticism in existence.” “Criticism has never been more ambitious, nor more useful.”<sup>4</sup>

Eliot’s opinion and that of the diverse Marxist or patriotic American detractors of Henry James seem to me quite wide of the mark. James to my mind is by far the best American critic of the nineteenth century who—*pace* Mr. Eliot—is brimful of ideas and critical concepts and has a well-defined theory and a point of view which allow him to characterize sensitively and evaluate persuasively a wide range of writers: largely, of course, the French, English, and American novelists of his own time. But on the other hand, the exaltation of the *Prefaces* to the greatest piece of criticism ever written seems to me extravagant. The *Prefaces*, as a totality, judged

<sup>1</sup> “On Henry James” (1918), in *The Question of Henry James*, ed. F. W. Dupee (New York, 1945), pp. 109-110.

<sup>2</sup> London, 1921, pp. 186-187.

<sup>3</sup> Cambridge, Mass., 1929, p. 120.

<sup>4</sup> Introduction to *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces* (New York, 1934), pp. vii, viii. (Hereinafter cited as *AN*.)

as criticism, are disappointing: they are, no doubt, of great interest to the student of James's life and career as a writer and they have the almost unique distinction of being an author's extended commentary on his own work. But the *Prefaces* are primarily reminiscences and commentaries and not criticism. They tell us where and when a book was written, what was the "germ" of the story—a remembered figure, an anecdote told at dinner, a mood recaptured—or they explain, expand, and develop the theme of the novel or indulge in general reflections on manners and life. Actual criticism is rare in the *Prefaces*: it is confined to the early novels when James objects to the hurried wind-up of *Roderick Hudson* or disparages *The American* as romantic and untrue to life. Moreover, the *Prefaces* contain reflections on the relation of art and life and do—though only intermittently—analyze and defend James's novelistic technique: particularly the need of a central intelligence, of a steady focus of narration.

But these passages—particularly the preface to *The Ambassadors*—form part and parcel of James's general critical work. To isolate them would overemphasize a single technical device, the "point of view," with which James has become identified with a vengeance and would obscure the totality of his critical achievement which contains discussions of most issues of literary theory in relation to many writers. We must examine primarily the five volumes of criticism published by James himself: *French Poets and Novelists* (1878), *Hawthorne* (1879), *Partial Portraits* (1888), *Essays in London and Elsewhere* (1893), and *Notes on Novelists* (1914), and must supplement these with the many scattered reviews beginning as early as 1864, introductions and pronouncements in letters, not quite completely collected in *Views and Reviews* (1908), *Notes and Reviews* (1921) and, recently, in *The Future of the Novel* (1956), *American Essays* (1956), and *Literary Reviews and Essays* (1957). It will be best, within our limits, to take James's critical work as a whole, from his first reviews in 1864 to the articles on "The New Novel" in 1914, fifty years later, and to consider it as a unity in which the criticism of his own novels takes only a minor place. No doubt there are some shifts of doctrine and marked changes of style during these fifty years: in particular, the earliest stage of James's reviewing in the *Nation* and the *North*

*American Review* in 1864-66 differs in being more pronouncedly moralistic and intellectualistic. The last writings are often overrun by "cobwebs," elaborate and sometimes strangely empty circumlocutions, or indulge in intricate similes almost for their own sake. Still, on the whole, James's critical views are remarkably coherent and consistent and show, at most, changes of emphasis due to a difference of audience or the changed atmosphere of the time.

Henry James, for a time, hoped to become the American Sainte-Beuve. In a letter he proposes "to do for our dear old English letters and writers *something* of what Ste. Beuve [*sic*] and the best French critics have done for theirs." He does not want to "imitate him, or reproduce him in English": rather he wants to do something analogous to his work which, it seems to him, belongs to the past while Henry James very self-consciously feels himself a man of the future, an American who has the advantage of looking at Europe from the outside. "We can deal freely with forms of civilization not our own, can pick and choose and assimilate and in short (aesthetically) claim our property wherever we find it." He hopes for "a vast intellectual fusion and synthesis of the various National tendencies of the world."<sup>5</sup> Surely James by his work, both fictional and critical, remained faithful to the dim program of this youthful boasting letter. All his life he was acutely conscious of the low status and condition of English and American criticism, and the need of a revival of criticism, especially of the novel. He constantly recognized the superiority of France on this point and derived, no doubt, his general method and style from the French critics, at least in his early stages. But we must not underrate the tremendous impression of Arnold's *Essays in Criticism* (1865), which James recalled reading first in the proof-sheets of the American reprint,<sup>6</sup> or the life-long admiration for Lowell, whose essays seemed to him "miracles of evocation, of resurrection, of transmission, of insight, of history, of poetry."<sup>7</sup> Nor must we forget the influence of the American and English reviewing media of his time and men like Leslie Stephen (whom James knew well) or Edmund Gosse (whom he admired extravagantly).

<sup>5</sup> To T. S. Perry, September 20, 1867, *The Selected Letters of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel (New York, 1955), pp. 22-23. (Hereinafter cited as *SL*.)

<sup>6</sup> *The American Essays*, ed. Leon Edel (New York, 1956), pp. 275-276. (Hereinafter cited as *AE*.)

<sup>7</sup> *Essays in London and Elsewhere* (New York, 1893), p. 74. (Hereinafter cited as *EL*.)

James's opinion of Sainte-Beuve shifted and was far from uncritical. In an early review (1865), James distinguishes "small criticism" and "great criticism." "Great criticism seems to us to touch more or less nearly on pure philosophy. Pure criticism must be of the small kind. Goethe is a great critic; M. Sainte-Beuve is a small one. Goethe frequently starts from an idea; M. Sainte-Beuve starts from a fact: Goethe from a general rule, M. Sainte-Beuve from a particular instance." Though James says that Sainte-Beuve "may be called the first of living critics," he deplors that he is "not a philosopher in so far as that he works with no supreme object," has no "deliberate theory of life, of nature, of the universe."<sup>8</sup> In a review of an English translation of *Portraits de femmes* James complains that Sainte-Beuve is "very little of a moralist and, in a really liberal sense of the word, not overmuch of a thinker." He is a psychologist, an empiric of great literary merits. "He is a little of a poet, a little of a moralist, a little of a historian, a little of a philosopher, a little of a romancer." He is a "wonderful man in flagrant default of imagination, of depth, of sagacity, of constructive skill," but there remains "his passion for literature—in which we include both his insatiable curiosity and his eternal gift of expression—his style."<sup>9</sup> But after Sainte-Beuve's death James's tone changes: a review of *Premiers Lundis* calls him "the acutest critic the world has seen" and complains only of an "impression of almost formidable sagacity," of his being, even in his early reviews, "too shrewd, too old, too *posé*."<sup>10</sup> A review of *English Portraits* then seems to appreciate more highly the "subtle interfusion of science and experience." "Most erudition beside Sainte-Beuve's seems sterile and egoistic; none was ever turned to such infinite account, so put to use, so applied, so controlled by life." James admires his relish for temperance, his perfect taste, his sense of measure in which he feels even a touch of Philistinism. He disagrees only with his low estimate of Balzac, whom Sainte-Beuve "detested, without suspecting, apparently, the colossal proportions of the great novelist's

<sup>8</sup> *Notes and Reviews*, preface by Pierre de Chaignon La Rose (Cambridge, Mass., 1921), pp. 103-104. (Hereinafter cited as *NR*.)

<sup>9</sup> *Nation*, VI, 454-455 (June 4, 1868). Reprinted in *Literary Reviews and Essays on American, English, and French Literature*, ed. Albert Mordell (New York, 1957), pp. 78-79. (Hereinafter cited as *LRE*.)

<sup>10</sup> *Nation*, XX, 117-118 (February 18, 1875), in *LRE*, pp. 79, 82-83.

genius.”<sup>11</sup> In James's longest essay on Sainte-Beuve, the same motifs are developed further: Sainte-Beuve had “the passion for scholarship and the passion for life. He was essentially a creature of books, a *litteratus*; and yet to his intensely bookish and acquisitive mind nothing human, nothing social, was alien . . . . He valued life and literature equally for the light they threw upon each other.” Again we hear of his just and comprehensive perceptions with the reservation that Sainte-Beuve was unjust to Balzac and George Sand and overgenerous to Baudelaire and Feydeau. But now James voices more strongly his reservations as to Sainte-Beuve's character, his malice, his feline innuendos, his insinuations. Still, he admires his fierce independence, his concept of the critic, not as “the narrow law-giver or the rigid censor,” but as “the student, the inquirer, the observer, the interpreter, the active, indefatigable commentator, whose constant aim was to arrive at justness of characterization. Sainte-Beuve's own faculty of characterization was of the rarest and most remarkable; he held it himself in the highest esteem; he valued immensely his *impression*.”<sup>12</sup>

This is why James finally preferred Sainte-Beuve to Scherer and Taine. Early James thought Scherer “a solid embodiment of Mr. Arnold's ideal critic.” He preferred him to Sainte-Beuve “because his morality is positive without being obtrusive.”<sup>13</sup> But later he thought Scherer disappointing. “He lacks imagination, and he is subject to odd lapses and perversities of taste.” James disapproves of his calling Thackeray “a cold, *ennuyeux* writer,” and chides him for “a strange dulness of vision” when Scherer “declares he can see nothing but dreariness in *Wilhelm Meister* or indeed in all [Goethe's] literary works except the lyrics and *Faust*.”<sup>14</sup> Taine from the very beginning seems to James not pre-eminently a critic but rather “alternately a philosopher and a historian.”<sup>15</sup> Taine's theory seems to him “decidedly a failure” even though he admits that “a group of works is more or less the product of a ‘situation.’” James complains of Taine's “inordinate haste to conclude,” of his “monstrous

<sup>11</sup> *Nation*, XX, 261-262 (April 15, 1875), in *LRE*, pp. 86-87.

<sup>12</sup> Review of Correspondence (1878) in the *North American Review*, CXXX, 56-57 (January, 1880).

<sup>13</sup> *NR*, pp. 103-105.

<sup>14</sup> Review of *Études critiques de littérature*, *Nation*, XXII, 233 (April 6, 1876), in *LRE*, pp. 118, 121.

<sup>15</sup> *NR*, p. 106.

cumulative violence of expression," and judges him "thoroughly a stranger to what we may call the intellectual climate of our literature."<sup>16</sup> He deplores his "want of *initiation*," his failure to apprehend the native code of aesthetics," crassly exhibited by his extravagant praise of *Aurora Leigh* and Lord Byron.<sup>17</sup> James, however, always admired Taine's essay on Balzac, "so much the finest thing ever written on our author,"<sup>18</sup> but concludes that Sainte-Beuve, "the least doctrinal of critics," had "by his very horror of dogmas, moulds and formulas," contributed more effectively than Taine to the science of literary interpretation. Sainte-Beuve's "truly devout patience with which he kept his final conclusion in abeyance," "his frank provisional empiricism" seems to him "more truly scientific than M. Taine's premature philosophy."<sup>19</sup>

What James said about Sainte-Beuve—of his anxiety to preserve his impression intact, his "provisional empiricism," his aim at a "justness of characterization"—describes also James's own ideal of criticism. "The critic," he wrote in 1868, is "simply a reader like all the others—a reader who prints his impressions."<sup>20</sup> "Nothing will ever take the place of the good old fashion of 'liking' a work of art or not liking it. The most improved criticism will not abolish that primitive, that ultimate test."<sup>21</sup> Criticism is "the only gate of appreciation, just as appreciation is, in regard to a work of art, the only gate of enjoyment." It is an appeal "from the general judgment, and not to it; is to the particular judgment altogether."<sup>22</sup> The true method of criticism is always that of sympathy, of identification with the work of art. "To criticise is to appreciate, to appropriate, to take intellectual possession, to establish in fine a relation with the criticised thing and make it one's own."<sup>23</sup> Criticism is "the principle of understanding things. Its business is

<sup>16</sup> Review of *History of English Literature*, *Atlantic Monthly*, XXIX, 469-472 (April, 1872), in *LRE*, pp. 63, 65.

<sup>17</sup> See review of *Notes sur l'Angleterre*, *Nation*, XIV, 58-60 (Jan. 25, 1872), in *LRE*, p. 60.

<sup>18</sup> *The Future of the Novel: Essays on the Art of Fiction*, ed. Leon Edel (New York, 1956), p. 115. (Hereinafter cited as *FN*.) See also *French Poets and Novelists* (London, 1878), p. 67. (Hereinafter cited as *FPN*.) Also *Notes on Novelists with Some Other Notes* (New York, 1916; first published in 1914), p. 128. (Hereinafter cited as *NN*.)

<sup>19</sup> Review of *History of English Literature*, p. 470, in *LRE*, pp. 63-64.

<sup>20</sup> Review of *Dallas Galbraith* (by Mrs. R. H. Davis), *Nation*, VII, 330-331 (October 22, 1868).

<sup>21</sup> *Partial Portraits* (London, 1919; first published in 1888), pp. 395-396. (Hereinafter cited as *PP*.)

<sup>22</sup> *FN*, p. 97.

<sup>23</sup> *AN*, p. 155.



to urge the claims of all things to be understood.”<sup>24</sup> There is no use quarreling with an author's subject, which is “given him by influences, by a process,” which is finally mysterious. We are concerned critically only with the treatment.<sup>25</sup> The aim of the critic is to “catch a talent in the fact, follow its line, and put a finger on its essence.” Thus James deplores the decline of the fashion of the literary portrait whose aim is “to fix a face and figure, to seize a literary character.”<sup>26</sup> Literary portraits were Sainte-Beuve's special *forte* and *Partial Portraits* is the title of one of James's own collections and could be the title of each of them. But submission to the author, sympathy, even the art of portraiture do not exclude judgment. James recognizes that “we never really get near a book save on the question of its being good or bad, of its really treating, that is, or not treating, its subject.”<sup>27</sup> But he seems, theoretically, at least, to know only one criterion of judgment: there is “*à priori*, no rule for a literary production but that it shall have genuine life.”<sup>28</sup>

This theory of criticism, so tentative, so empirical, so conscious of all the difficulties of what James calls “the most postponed and complicated of the arts, the last qualified for and arrived at, the one requiring behind it most maturity, most power to understand and compare,”<sup>29</sup> does not, however, do justice to James's practice. Actually James has an extraordinarily clear grasp of the nature of art, its relations to reality and the other activities of man; he has very definite, though often implicit, requirements for successful art and he has the power to apply his standards to the authors he examines. His theoretical position seems clear-cut and coherent. He is neither a “realist,” the label pinned on him in most histories of literature, nor a “formalist,” a devotee of art for art's sake for which he is often dismissed.

James definitely disapproved of “art for art's sake”: its creed seemed to him to exhibit “a most injurious disbelief in the illimitable alchemy of art,”<sup>30</sup> to presuppose a false divorce of art from reality and morality. James, no doubt, admires Gautier and quotes the poem “L'art” as “a case of an aesthetic, an almost technical, con-

<sup>24</sup> *Views and Reviews*, introduction by Le Roy Phillips (Boston, 1908), p. 94. (Hereinafter cited as *VR*.)

<sup>25</sup> *NN*, p. 259. Similarly *AN*, p. 201; *AE*, p. 206.

<sup>26</sup> *PP*, pp. 137-138.

<sup>27</sup> *AE*, p. 228.

<sup>29</sup> *AE*, p. 116.

<sup>28</sup> *VR*, p. 227.

<sup>30</sup> *FPN*, p. 201.



viction, glowing with a kind of moral fervour,"<sup>31</sup> but he dismisses the preface to *Mlle de Maupin* as ridiculous<sup>32</sup> and chides Gautier for the hardening of his moral feelings. His pictures of Spanish bull-fights show "what length *l'art pour l'art* can carry the kindest-tempered of men."<sup>33</sup> The rags of the beggars on the Spanish steps in Rome, which Gautier could "see and enjoy for ever," remain for James "but filth, and filth is poverty, and poverty a haunting shadow, and picturesque squalor a mockery." As Gautier is a "master of a perfect style which has never reflected a spiritual spark,"<sup>34</sup> so Baudelaire is merely another inordinate cultivator of the sense of the picturesque which he found even in darkness and dirt. Baudelaire (whom James obviously misinterprets as a mere sensationalist) offers a proof for "the crudity of sentiment of the advocates of 'art for art.'" <sup>35</sup> The representatives of the aesthetic movement in England did not appeal to James either: he reviewed Swinburne's drama *Chastelard* most unfavorably<sup>36</sup> and severely trounced *Essays and Studies* as "simply dabbling in the relatively very shallow pool of the picturesque." "The author does not understand morality—a charge to which he would be probably quite indifferent; but . . . he does not at all understand immorality."<sup>37</sup> Pater seems to him "curiously negative and faintly-grey . . . . He is the mask without the face,"<sup>38</sup> and Wilde "was never in the smallest of degree interesting" to him but had become so in the trial only because of "this hideous human history."<sup>39</sup> D'Annunzio finally gave an occasion for a summing-up on the aesthetic movement: a spectacle "strange and finally wearisome," that of "beauty at any price,"<sup>40</sup> which James sees confirmed by the example of D'Annunzio. James's criticism of D'Annunzio is, no doubt, directed not only against his "exclusive aestheticism" which is "bound sooner or later to spring a leak"<sup>41</sup> but against D'Annunzio's sexuality, his cruelty, insolence, and ultimate vulgarity. The objections are not disentangled, though at the end James asks whether the aesthetic

<sup>31</sup> FPN, p. 38.

<sup>33</sup> FPN, p. 44.

<sup>35</sup> FPN, p. 64.

<sup>36</sup> NR, pp. 132-133.

<sup>37</sup> VR, p. 59.

<sup>38</sup> To E. Gosse, Dec. 13, 1894, SL, p. 146.

<sup>39</sup> To Gosse, April 8, 1895, SL, p. 147.

<sup>40</sup> NN, p. 246.

<sup>41</sup> NN, p. 283.

<sup>32</sup> FPN, p. 35.

<sup>34</sup> FPN, pp. 55-56.

adventure “*need* give us no more comforting news of success” than what he considers the failure of D’Annunzio.<sup>42</sup>

The criticism of the aesthetic movement is directed at the moral obtuseness and its falsity to a full reality. But James cannot be described simply as a “realist” or a moralist. Certainly, there are many passages in James’s writings which, in general, indicate approval of “realism” and profess his admiration for what are usually considered its masters: for Balzac, Flaubert, Maupassant, Daudet, George Eliot, and Turgenev. Over and over James repeats that “the only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life,”<sup>43</sup> that it has the “large, free character of an immense and exquisite correspondence with life.”<sup>44</sup> “Art,” he says in a well-known passage, “plucks its material . . . in the garden of life—which material elsewhere grown is stale and uneatable.”<sup>45</sup> James criticizes George Sand for lacking “exactitude—the method of truth”<sup>46</sup> and, as early as 1864, recommends “the famous ‘realistic system’” for study and advises the author of a picturesque novel, Miss Harriet Prescott, to “cultivate a delicate perception of the actual.”<sup>47</sup> In his last survey (1914) he praises “The New Novel” for “hugging the shore of the real,” its “appetite for a closer notation, a sharper specification of the signs of life.” He constantly welcomes “exactness—truth of detail,” “saturation,” “specification,” in Balzac and Flaubert. He admires Wells and Bennett for being each “immersed in his own body of reference,” for “being saturated” which “is to be documented,” for the “smell of packed actuality” emanating from their books.<sup>48</sup>

But this insistence upon the reference of art to reality does not, in James, mean an obfuscation of the difference between life and art: art is not a mirror, art cannot be “an amorphous slice”<sup>49</sup> of life as Zola would want us to have it. Nor can “real people” be transferred into a novel. “The original gives hints but the writer does what he likes with them.”<sup>50</sup> James objects specifically to D’Annunzio’s *Il Fuoco* “for the impression of a direct transfer, a ‘lift,’ bodily, of

<sup>42</sup> NN, p. 293.

<sup>44</sup> PP, p. 402.

<sup>46</sup> FPN, p. 184.

<sup>48</sup> NN, pp. 320-324.

<sup>50</sup> Hawthorne (Ithaca, N.Y., 1956; first published in 1879), pp. 106-107. (Hereinafter cited as *Ha.*) See also AN, p. 230.

<sup>43</sup> PP, p. 378, or p. 227.

<sup>45</sup> AN, p. 312.

<sup>47</sup> NR, pp. 23, 32.

<sup>49</sup> NN, p. 342.

something seen and known."<sup>51</sup> Art, even the art of the novel, is not copying, not imitation but a selection from life, a transformation, a creation, "life being all inclusion and confusion, and art being all discrimination and selection."<sup>52</sup> Art is a "chemical process, the crucible or retort from which things emerge for a new function,"<sup>53</sup> or, in another metaphor, art must be "the tempered and directed hammer that makes the metal hard"<sup>54</sup> or, with the grandest claim, the artist is the modern alchemist who "renews something like the old dream of the secret of life."<sup>55</sup>

Art actually can only achieve the illusion of life and can achieve it only by the "authority" of the writer, inducing conviction, belief, acceptance in the reader. James is constantly preoccupied with this problem of plausibility, "the strong internal evidence of truthfulness" he found, e.g., in George Eliot<sup>56</sup> while he thought it absent in Hugo's *Les Travailleurs de la mer*<sup>57</sup> or in his *Marie Tudor*.<sup>58</sup>

James found it, however, difficult to define the limits of plausibility, of probability in Aristotle's sense. On the one hand he certainly admired much unrealistic art and cultivated the ghost story as for him the "most possible form of the fairy-tale."<sup>59</sup> In his discussion of *The Turn of the Screw* he expressly rejects the reduction of his ghosts to psychic phenomena amenable to study by the Society for Psychic Research as his ghosts were precisely "goblins, elves, imps, demons."<sup>60</sup> James also often recognizes the distinction between the novel and the romance: he ranks the romance lower, thinks it an excuse "to relieve the writer of all analysis of character, to enable him to forge his interest out of the exhibition of circumstance rather than out of the examination of motive,"<sup>61</sup> but in later years he treated "romance" and "romanticism" with increasing tenderness: he admired Stevenson quite inordinately both as a heroic person and an accomplished writer with style and imagination; he

<sup>51</sup> NN, p. 275.

<sup>52</sup> NN, p. 275.

<sup>53</sup> AN, p. 123.

<sup>57</sup> NR, p. 199.

<sup>58</sup> It "has little to do with nature and nothing to do with history or morality," VR, p. 188.

<sup>59</sup> AN, p. 254.

<sup>60</sup> AN, p. 175. The theory of Edmund Wilson (*The Triple Thinkers*, New York, 1948, pp. 88 ff.) that the ghosts are a hallucination of the governess is also refuted by the evidence of the *Notebooks*, ed. F. O. Matthiessen and K. Murdock (New York, 1947), pp. 178-179.

<sup>61</sup> NR, pp. 34-35.

<sup>59</sup> AN, p. 120.

<sup>64</sup> NN, p. 193.

<sup>66</sup> VR, p. 4.

appreciated Rostand and his "happy romantic principle" though wondering and anxious at his "deflection from reality."<sup>62</sup> He dismisses, among the definitions of romance, that of "a matter indispensably of boats, or of caravans, or of tigers, or of historical characters, or of ghosts, or of forgers, or of detectives, or of beautiful wicked women, or of pistols and knives" and is not satisfied with reducing it to the "idea of the facing of danger." He prefers to think of it as "experience disengaged, disembroiled, disencumbered, exempt from the conditions that we usually know to attach to it." Whimsically he pictures us readers as sitting in the balloon of experience tied to earth by a rope while "the art of the romancer is, 'for the fun of it,' insidiously to cut the cable, to cut it without our detecting him."<sup>63</sup> But James cannot quite believe that the trick of cutting the cable without detection can be brought off successfully. *The Scarlet Letter* suffers from "a want of reality and an abuse of the fanciful element"<sup>64</sup> and in *The Marble Faun* Hawthorne has "forfeited a precious advantage in ceasing to tread his native soil. Half the virtue of *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of the Seven Gables* is in their local quality; they are impregnated with the New England air."<sup>65</sup> Still, James has trouble with "fixing the measure of reality." He finds it hard to accept Don Quixote or Micawber. Their "reality is a very delicate shade; it is a reality so coloured by the author's vision that, vivid as it may be, one would hesitate to propose it as a model."<sup>66</sup> He refers to Dickens's characters as performing "a feverish dance to the great fiddling of Dickens." Dickens made them dance but "he could not make them stand or sit *at once* quietly and expressively."<sup>67</sup> *Our Mutual Friend* seemed to him, in 1865, crowded with grotesque creatures and gratuitous distortions which have no humanity in them.<sup>68</sup>

On occasion James can say that the novelist must regard himself "as an historian and his narrative as a history,"<sup>69</sup> but mostly he sees the fallacy of this appeal to what really happened. He certainly considers the "historical" novel an impossible feat "of completely putting off one consciousness before beginning to take on another."<sup>70</sup>

<sup>62</sup> *The Scenic Art: Notes on Acting and the Drama*, ed. Allan Wade (New Brunswick, N. J., 1948), pp. 322-324.

<sup>63</sup> *AN*, pp. 32-34.

<sup>64</sup> *Ha*, p. 131.

<sup>65</sup> *NN*, p. 151.

<sup>66</sup> *PP*, p. 116. Cf. p. 379.

<sup>64</sup> *Ha*, p. 90.

<sup>66</sup> *PP*, p. 387.

<sup>68</sup> *VR*, pp. 153-161.

<sup>70</sup> *AE*, p. 230.

It is "a mere *escamotage*": even such a master as Flaubert failed dismally with his historical novels. A New England regionalist writer, Sarah Orne Jewett, who tried her hand at a historical romance, is solemnly exhorted: "go back to the dear country of the Pointed Firs, *come* back to the palpable, present *intimate* that throbs responsive."<sup>71</sup> The historical novel must fail precisely in the illusion of life, the cultivation of which seems to him "the beginning and the end of the art of the novelist."<sup>72</sup>

But why should the novelist try to create this illusion of life? What is the ultimate function of art? It is certainly not in James's mind simply that of a social mirror or propaganda. He deplores that prose fiction now (1914) "occupies itself as never before with the 'condition of the people,' a fact quite irrelevant to the nature it has taken on," with the result that "its nature amounts exactly to the complacent declaration of a common literary level."<sup>73</sup> But James is acutely aware of the social roots of art. "The flower of art blooms only where the soil is deep, . . . it takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature."<sup>74</sup> This is the insistent theme of the book on Hawthorne: his having lived in a crude and simple society. "No State, in the European sense of the word, and indeed barely a specific national name. No sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army, no diplomatic service, no country gentlemen, no palaces, no castles, nor manors. . . ."<sup>75</sup> The nostalgia for Europe with its snobbish overtones has its deeply felt seriousness: a concern for the isolation of the artist, particularly in the United States, and a fear of leveling, of the smoothing off of edges, of the decay of character which James still finds in Balzac and Dickens but begins to miss in an egalitarian democracy.<sup>76</sup> James can then go to extremes of illusionism and escapism. The function of the novel will be "to provide another world," "an experience that, as effective as the dentist's ether, muffles the ache of the actual."<sup>77</sup> But art can hardly be only a pain-killer. James himself adds immediately: "what we get of course, in proportion as the picture lives, is simply another actual—the actual of other people," though he professes not to know why that should be a re-

<sup>71</sup> Letter, Oct. 5, 1901, *SL*, pp. 202-203.

<sup>72</sup> *PP*, p. 390.

<sup>74</sup> *Ha*, p. 2.

<sup>76</sup> *NN*, p. 151.

<sup>73</sup> *NN*, p. 316.

<sup>75</sup> *Ha*, p. 34.

<sup>77</sup> *NN*, p. 436.

lief. Usually James understood that we return to reality fortified, that the artist, in allowing us "to live the life of others,"<sup>78</sup> not only extends our experience but gives us a view of the world and a knowledge of ourselves. "The great question as to a poet or a novelist is, How does he feel about life? what, in the last analysis, is his philosophy," since his work is an "expression of a total view of the world"<sup>79</sup> and "imaginative writers of the first order always give us an impression that they have a kind of philosophy."<sup>80</sup> In a letter to G. B. Shaw James summarized his "suspicion" of "the 'encouraging' *representational* work," the one-track mind of Shaw, while maintaining the high civilizing function of art: its contribution to man's self-awareness and hence also to his moral decisions. Works of art "are capable of saying more things to man about himself than any other 'works' whatever are capable of doing." We artists "enable him to pick and choose and compare and know, enable him to arrive at any sort of synthesis that isn't, through all its superficialities and vacancies, a base and illusive humbug."<sup>81</sup>

Synthesis, a total view of the world and of man, presupposes an inclusiveness of art, forbids a partial view of reality: implies an artist speaking as a whole man. This is where morality, conscience, comes into James's scheme and literary standards. Art must not be purely descriptive, mere local color, a mere reproduction of the surface of the world. Gautier and Loti are great masters of the picturesque but they ignore the soul of man. But man, James demands, must not be represented partially, as a mere animal. He must appear as a total human being, moral and intellectual. On the question of "decency," the treatment of sex in fiction, James seems to contradict himself—but only apparently so. He deplored the unspoken censorship which excluded large tracts of life from the novel, he regretted the spinsterish restrictions of the time, and often pleaded for freedom on such matters as he pleaded for freedom in the arts in general. But, confronted with the themes of Baudelaire or even Maupassant, James beats a hasty retreat into what must be described as his basic Puritanism or rather into a simple aversion for the animal and the perverse but often also for the universally, healthily human. A late essay on Matilde Serao puts the matter very clearly: James

<sup>78</sup> *FN*, p. 33.

<sup>80</sup> *PP*, p. 238.

<sup>79</sup> *FPN*, p. 243.

<sup>81</sup> Jan. 20, 1909, *SL*, p. 134.

deplores the "conspiracy of silence"<sup>82</sup> in English and American fiction but treats Matilde Serao as a warning example of what complete license will lead to: a literature which will be predominantly erotic with "no place speedily . . . left for anything else."<sup>83</sup> James concludes somewhat whimsically that "unmistakably we turn round again to the opposite pole, and there before we know it have positively laid a clinging hand on dear old Jane Austen."<sup>84</sup> These are dead issues today, long ago resolved in favor of freedoms undreamt of even by the flamboyant Matilde Serao. James always held two views he felt perfectly compatible: discontent with the timidity of the Anglo-Saxon conventions and embarrassment and even horror at the eroticism of the French novel. It became particularly acute in the case of Maupassant, whom James calls "a lion in the path," as it seems to him "discouraging to find what low views are compatible with mastery," that one can be "at once so licentious and so impeccable."<sup>85</sup> Baudelaire is another case of a "rare combination of technical zeal and patience and of vicious sentiment."<sup>86</sup> Even the admired Balzac, we are told, "had no natural sense of morality, and this we cannot help thinking a serious fault in a novelist,"<sup>87</sup> and Flaubert is elaborately criticised for the limits of his moral vision, culminating in the extravagant charge of "inexperience and indifference in regard to the phenomena of character and the higher kinds of sensibility."<sup>88</sup> In ever new variations James develops a contrast with the English and American novel and the Anglo-Saxon character in which the French appear as masters of craft and form, as painters of the surface of the world, of sensations and instincts and desires, of the relations between men and women, but as utterly deficient in depicting "the operation of character, the possibilities of conduct, the part played in the world by the *idea*."<sup>89</sup> "When they lay their hand upon the spirit of man, they cease to seem expert."<sup>90</sup> The contrast between the English novel and the French is drawn so sharply that the English appear as the blundering, formless, prudish psychologists and moralists and the French as the shallow, immoral masters of the surface and of sensations. Sometimes James is somewhat put out by the presence of Paul Bourget,

<sup>82</sup> *NN*, p. 296.

<sup>84</sup> *NN*, p. 313.

<sup>86</sup> *FPN*, p. 64.

<sup>88</sup> *EL*, p. 159.

<sup>90</sup> *EL*, p. 157.

<sup>83</sup> *NN*, p. 309.

<sup>85</sup> *PP*, pp. 284, 287.

<sup>87</sup> *FPN*, p. 89.

<sup>89</sup> *EL*, p. 183.



"who notes with extraordinary closeness the action of life on the soul"<sup>91</sup> and admits that "if there were not a poet like Sully-Prudhomme or a moralist like M. Renan, the thesis that the French imagination has none but a sensual conscience would be made simpler than it ever is to prove anything."<sup>92</sup> But, on the whole, James speaks always of "we of the English faith,"<sup>93</sup> "we of the English tongue" with our "Anglo-Saxon theory,"<sup>94</sup> identifying himself with the English moralists and psychologists but chiding them for their neglect of art, for "being a little weak in the conjuring line."<sup>95</sup> The implication of the contrast is obvious. James himself aims at righting the balance; he himself is creating the psychological, moral novel which is also a work of art and form.

But the synthesis has been accomplished or approached before: in James's three masters, Turgenev, George Eliot, and Hawthorne. *A Sportsman's Sketches* "offers a capital example of moral meaning giving a sense to form and form giving relief to moral meaning."<sup>96</sup> "A certain middle field where morals and aesthetics move in concert"<sup>97</sup> is also occupied by George Eliot, though the novel was too often for her "not primarily a picture of life, capable of deriving a high value from its form, but a moralised fable."<sup>98</sup> Also Hawthorne, who deeply influenced James's own novels,<sup>99</sup> succeeded in transmuting "his heavy moral burden into the very substance of the imagination,"<sup>100</sup> though James felt that he failed when he used allegory—never "a first-rate literary form" in spite of Bunyan and Spenser. Allegory is a deviation into didacticism: "It is apt to spoil two good things—a story and a moral, a meaning and a form."<sup>101</sup>

This union of morals and aesthetics seems to James peculiarly personal. "The deepest quality of a work of art will always be the quality of the mind of the producer . . . . No good novel will ever proceed from a superficial mind; that seems to me an axiom which, for the artist in fiction, will cover all needful moral ground."<sup>102</sup> Thus James cannot accept Flaubert's insistence on complete "im-

<sup>91</sup> *EL*, p. 155.

<sup>92</sup> *PP*, p. 255.

<sup>93</sup> *EL*, p. 184.

<sup>94</sup> *VR*, p. 37.

<sup>95</sup> See Marius Bewley, *The Complex Fate* (London, 1952) for the best discussion of Hawthorne's influence.

<sup>100</sup> *Ha*, p. 46.

<sup>101</sup> *Ha*, p. 50.

<sup>102</sup> *PP*, pp. 406-407.

<sup>92</sup> *EL*, p. 157.

<sup>94</sup> *EL*, pp. 208-209.

<sup>96</sup> *FPN*, p. 221.

<sup>98</sup> *PP*, p. 50.

personality" and rejects Zola's reliance on scientific procedure. "Vision and opportunity reside in a personal sense and a personal history, and no short cut to them in the interest of plausible fiction has ever been discovered."<sup>103</sup>

Still, James means by "personality" something individual which may be hidden, concealed, and implied and he actually disapproved of the preoccupation with biography. He deplores the "complete intellectual muddle" which has made the pitiful story of the Brontë sisters cover and supplant "their matter, their spirit, their style, their talent, their taste." "Literature," he protests, "is an objective, projected result; it is life that is the unconscious, the agitated, the struggling, floundering cause. But the fashion has been, in looking at the Brontës, so to confound the cause with the result that we cease to know, in the presence of such ecstasies, what we have hold of or what we are talking about. They represent, the ecstasies, the high-water mark of sentimental judgment."<sup>104</sup>

James, on this point, pleads for a sharp distinction between the main literary kinds. "'Kinds' are the very life of literature, and truth and strength come from the complete recognition of them." "The confusion of kinds is the inelegance of letters and the stultification of values."<sup>105</sup> James was never particularly interested in poetry: he seems to lack the descriptive vocabulary in speaking of Musset, Morris, or Lowell. But he has his special genre theory for lyric poetry, a recognition of its peculiarly personal character. "The Poet is most the Poet when he is preponderantly lyrical, when he speaks, laughing or crying, most directly from his individual heart . . . . It is not the *image* of life that he thus expresses, so much as life itself, in its sources—so much as his own intimate, essential states and feelings."<sup>106</sup> Thus he relishes the "intensely and closely personal savour" of Musset<sup>107</sup> and the "great gift of passion" in Byron and criticizes Lowell for being "too literary." His poetry is often "more the result of an interest in the general form than of the stirred emotion."<sup>108</sup> The intense egotism of Whitman, however, offended James and he lectured him that art "requires, above all things, a suppression of one's self, a subordination of one's self to an idea." "You must forget yourself in your ideas" in order to be a poet. "Your

<sup>103</sup> *NN*, p. 36.

<sup>105</sup> *AN*, p. 111.

<sup>107</sup> *FPN*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>104</sup> *FN*, p. 101.

<sup>106</sup> *FN*, p. 104.

<sup>108</sup> *EL*, pp. 63-64.

personal qualities . . . are impertinent. You must be *possessed*, and you must strive to possess your possession."<sup>109</sup> The theoretical inconsistency is, no doubt, due to James's objection to a particular personality—the distastefully pagan, barbaric Whitman. He could, however, relax his insistence on the purity of kinds, admitting that for a particular effect lines may be crossed<sup>110</sup> or that an author such as Kipling proves "that there are just as many kinds, as many ways, as many forms and degrees of the 'right,' as there are personal points in view."<sup>111</sup>

Still, in the novel, James while granting an ultimate personal quality insists on extreme objectivity, on illusion even to the degree of delusion. The novel must not appear to be a novel; the author must not interfere. He commends Turgenev for being "superior to the strange and second-rate policy of explaining or presenting [his characters] by reprobation or apology."<sup>112</sup> He comes down hard on Trollope for taking "a suicidal satisfaction in reminding the reader that the story he was telling was only, after all, a make-believe."<sup>113</sup> Trollope, he complains, "admits that the events he narrates have not really happened, and that he can give his narrative any turn the reader may like best. Such a betrayal of a sacred office seems to me, I confess, a terrible crime."<sup>114</sup> Miss Harriet Prescott in her novel *Azarian* fingers her puppet to death. "'Good heavens! Madam!' we are forever on the point of exclaiming, 'let the poor things speak for themselves!'"<sup>115</sup> James, one must conclude, would have no use for Sterne deliberately breaking the artistic illusion or for Thackeray fingering his puppets.

The insistence on objectivity makes James condemn also the first-person narrative or the fictional autobiography. *Gil Blas* and *David Copperfield* are examples of the "terrible *fluidity* of self-revelation."<sup>116</sup> But he is not satisfied with the usual narration by an omniscient author. One way to eliminate him would be to approximate fiction to drama, to let dialogue grow, to compose by scenes rather than by summary panoramic narration and description. James's *The Awkward Age* is an experiment in this technique. But, in general, James does not approve of an attempt to emulate the

<sup>109</sup> *AE*, pp. 136-137.

<sup>111</sup> *VR*, p. 228.

<sup>113</sup> *PP*, p. 116.

<sup>115</sup> *NR*, p. 21.

<sup>110</sup> *AN*, p. 111.

<sup>112</sup> *FN*, p. 232.

<sup>114</sup> *PP*, p. 379.

<sup>116</sup> *AN*, p. 321.

drama. James's own unlucky dramatic experiments sharpened rather his consciousness that a play and a novel are eternally distinct and have their own rigid laws. James's admiration for the drama is largely due to the demands for unity, economy, and concentration made by the stage. In 1875 he considered the "dramatic form of all literary forms the very noblest" and indulged in an elaborate comparison between the drama and "a box of fixed dimensions and inelastic material, into which a mass of precious things are to be packed away." "To work successfully beneath a few grave, rigid laws, is always a strong man's highest ideal of success."<sup>117</sup> James's own plays are attempts to conform to the conventions of the well-made play imported from Paris: his articles on the younger Dumas and Rostand owe their tone to a genuine envy for their mastery of stagecraft and to James's overwhelming consciousness of its difficulties. James admired the *Comédie française* and some of its actors such as Coquelin almost unreservedly and took a dim view of the London stage and what he felt to be the amateurishness even of its most prominent actors, Henry Irving and Ellen Terry. He welcomed Ibsen for all sorts of reasons but also because Ibsen "with his curious and beautiful passion for the unity of time (carried in him to a point which almost always implies also that of place), condemns himself to admirable rigors."<sup>118</sup>

Thus it seems hardly surprising that drama and dramatic unity in the novel are frequent terms of praise. Among George Eliot's novels, *The Mill on the Floss* has "most dramatic continuity," in distinction from descriptive, discursive narration.<sup>119</sup> The terms "scenic" and "scene" occur most frequently in contradiction to "picture." James speaks with approval of some of his stories as demeaning themselves "as little constituted dramas, little exhibitions founded on the logic of the 'scene,' the unit of the scene, the general scenic consistency."<sup>120</sup> In discussing *The Awkward Age* he praises the beauty of the conception "in this approximation of the respective divisions of my form to the successive Acts of a Play"<sup>121</sup> and its abiding "without a moment's deflexion by the principle of the stage-play."<sup>122</sup>

But James himself considered *The Awkward Age* an experiment

<sup>117</sup> VR, pp. 181-182.

<sup>118</sup> VR, p. 29.

<sup>121</sup> AN, p. 110.

<sup>118</sup> EL, p. 241.

<sup>120</sup> AN, p. 157.

<sup>122</sup> AN, p. 115.

and, in general, thought of scene as simply some concentrated action, not necessarily in dialogue form. Usually he disapproved of too much reliance on dialogue.

Admirable for illustration, functional for illustration, dialogue has its function perverted, and therewith its life destroyed, when forced, all clumsily, into the constructive office. It is in the drama, of course, that it is constructive; but the drama lives by a law so different, verily, that everything that is right for it seems wrong for the prose picture, and everything that is right for the prose picture addressed directly, in turn, to the betrayal of the "play."

Dialogue, for instance, in the novels of the elder Dumas seems to James "the fluid element" "with so little wrought texture that we float and splash in it; feeling it thus resemble much more some capacious tepid tank than the figured tapestry, all overscored with objects in fine perspective, which symbolizes to me (if one may have a symbol) the last word of the achieved fable."<sup>123</sup> James complains of the "preposterous pretension of [dialogue], this most fatuous of the luxuries of looseness to acquit itself with authority of the structural and compositional office." He argues that spoken words in a novel should "live in a medium, and in a medium only," meaning apparently by medium a surrounding descriptive setting and analytical preparation, while a play "lives exclusively on the spoken word—not on the report of the thing said but, directly and audibly, on that very thing; . . . it thrives by its law on the exercise under which the novel hopelessly collapses."<sup>124</sup> Thus a novel like Galdos's *Realidad*, which is completely in dialogue, or a story like Hemingway's "The Killers" would have met with James's disapproval as he insists on an alternation of narrative, description, and dialogue. Dialogue is only a means toward a general effect which James often calls the "picture," and "picture," at almost any turn, is "jealous of drama," as "drama is suspicious of picture."<sup>125</sup>

"Picture" is used rather shiftingly by James: at times it is only the descriptive part of a novel, inferior to the "scene"; at others it is a metaphor for the total composition, the general "presence" of the novel, sometimes with a definite parallel to painting in James's mind. The analogy of perspective or "foreshortening" seems to

<sup>123</sup> FN, pp. 122-123.

<sup>125</sup> AN, p. 298.

<sup>124</sup> NN, pp. 352-353.

strike him most. "The mystery of the foreshortened procession of facts and figures . . . is but another name for the picture governed by the principle of composition" in contrast to the usual method of "the juxtaposition of items emulating the column of numbers of a schoolboy's sum in addition. It is the art of the brush, I know, as opposed to the art of the slate-pencil; but to the art of the brush the novel must return, I hold, to recover whatever may be still recoverable of its sacrificed honor."<sup>126</sup> But this analogy to painting and picture is strictly an analogy. "Foreshortening" in the novel means merely the author's skill of subordinating some events and characters, the perspective created by a focus of narration. James disapproved of the Goncourts' attempt to "poach" on the art of painting<sup>127</sup> and was always severely critical of writers merely interested in pictorial descriptions and local color. "Picture" is not enough. "Every good story is of course both a picture and an idea, and the more they are interfused the better the problem is solved."<sup>128</sup> James requires of D'Annunzio that we should "feel a general idea present"<sup>129</sup> and disparages Balzac as an intellect even though James recognizes that his books purvey a great many ideas. "But we must add that his letters make us feel that these ideas are themselves in a certain sense 'things.'" They are "pigments,"<sup>130</sup> and pigments are obviously not enough. Ideas must not merely serve a decorative scheme; a human and intellectual meaning must arise from them.

If illusion and idea in the novel must be achieved by objective means, but not dramatically, neither by dialogue nor by a first-person narrative, no alternative remains but James's panacea: the use of an observer or as he sometimes calls him a "reflector." As early as 1868 James found it "good to think of an observer standing aloof, the critic, the idle commentator of it all, taking notes, as we may say, in the interest of truth."<sup>131</sup> Both in theory and in his novelistic practice James emphasized more and more a single focus of consciousness, a single "point of view," a "central light."<sup>132</sup> The *Prefaces* define these "centers": Maisie as the "ironic center" of *What Maisie Knew*,<sup>133</sup> Lambert Strether as "the register," the "reflector" of *The Ambassadors* within whose compass everything is

<sup>126</sup> *FN*, p. 121.

<sup>128</sup> *PP*, p. 269.

<sup>130</sup> *FPN*, p. 139.

<sup>133</sup> *AN*, p. 130.

<sup>127</sup> *EL*, p. 197.

<sup>129</sup> *NN*, p. 279.

<sup>131</sup> *VR*, p. 135.

<sup>133</sup> *AN*, p. 147.

kept,<sup>134</sup> the “successive centers” in *The Wings of the Dove*, “portions of the subject commanded by them as by happy points of view,”<sup>135</sup> and two characters, the Prince and the Princess, in the two halves of *The Golden Bowl*.<sup>136</sup> The point of view in James is not, however, just a technical device serving the “economy of treatment,” permitting “recording consistency.”<sup>137</sup> It serves to heighten the consciousness of the character and hence to increase the reader’s identification with him. Ultimately it is another device to achieve the general effect of illusion. “The figures in any picture, the agents in any drama, are interesting only in proportion as they feel their respective situations.”<sup>138</sup> They must therefore be “intense perceivers”<sup>139</sup> to serve their purpose. There must be a “mind of some sort—in the sense of a reflecting and colouring medium.”<sup>140</sup> This insistence on the mind and intellect of the “reflector” explains James’s criticism of both *Madame Bovary* and *L’Éducation sentimentale*. Emma Bovary suffers from the “poverty of her consciousness” and Frédéric Moreau is a nonentity, an “unconsciousness.” It was a mistake to present Madame Arnoux only through Moreau’s eyes, “a moral mistake,” since Flaubert did not even realize that he made it.<sup>141</sup> Everything depends on the quality of the consciousness and not on the mere device of the focus or an intermediary narrator. James thus did not approve of the technique of Conrad’s *Chance* since he apparently did not admire the mind of Marlow. He thought the book “an exhibition of method” and Conrad “a votary of the way to do a thing that shall make it undergo most doing.”<sup>142</sup> This seems to describe James’s own technique in later years, though not apparently in James’s own mind. He thought that in Conrad (whom he admired for other reasons)<sup>143</sup> “objectivity is definitely compromised” by the complex reference to several narrators. There is a “baffled relation” between the subject matter and its emergence which we find constituted by the circumvalations of “Chance.”<sup>144</sup>

The moral scrupulosity of Lambert Strether or again the very innocence of Maisie set against the monstrous behavior of the grown-ups make them fit subjects as “reflectors,” but they can serve as

<sup>134</sup> AN, p. 317.

<sup>136</sup> AN, p. 329.

<sup>138</sup> AN, p. 62.

<sup>140</sup> AN, p. 67.

<sup>143</sup> NN, p. 345.

<sup>144</sup> NN, p. 349, 355.

<sup>135</sup> AN, p. 296.

<sup>137</sup> AN, p. 300.

<sup>139</sup> AN, p. 71.

<sup>141</sup> NN, pp. 83-87.

<sup>143</sup> SL, pp. 157-158.



reflectors only because James considers them types. "Type," in James, is both the specific and the general, the concrete universal, the "eminent instance"<sup>145</sup> which thus achieves the universalizing function of art. Turgenev's characters are praised for being particular and general, as is Homais in *Madame Bovary*, while Dickens's characters are "particular without being general; because they are individuals without being types; because we do not feel their continuity with the rest of humanity."<sup>146</sup> George Eliot "proceeds from the abstract to the concrete"; her characters are often "disembodied types,"<sup>147</sup> or really not proper types but concepts. James, strangely enough, considers Emma Bovary not a type in his sense: she is too "specific," she does not even attain the average, the "middling." "Hers is a narrow middling"; she is not sufficiently "illustrational."<sup>148</sup> James seems to underrate Flaubert's implication in Emma; he does not see the universality of her disillusioned romanticism and thinks too purely of the localized setting and the conventional plot of adultery and suicide.

James, in theory, would not however admit the isolation of a character or type from the novel as a totality. He rejects Trollope's preference for "novels of character" in opposition to "novels of plot." It is "an idle controversy," as "character, in any sense in which we can get at it, is action, and action is plot, and any plot which hangs together, even if it pretend to interest us only in the fashion of a Chinese puzzle, plays upon our emotion, our suspense, by means of personal references."<sup>149</sup> In his best known essay, "The Art of Fiction" (1884), James emphatically rejects the distinction. "What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character? What is either a picture or a novel that is *not* of character."<sup>150</sup> But often enough James does exalt character against description. "An author's paramount charge is the cure of souls, to the subjection, and if need be to the exclusion, of the picturesque. Let him look to his character: his *figures* will take care of themselves."<sup>151</sup> The defense of character means a defense of psychology in the novel. "What we want is Passion's self . . . What do we care about the beauty of man or woman in comparison with

<sup>145</sup> *AN*, p. 12.

<sup>147</sup> *PP*, pp. 51-52.

<sup>148</sup> *PP*, pp. 105-106.

<sup>151</sup> *NR*, p. 19.

<sup>146</sup> *PP*, pp. 317-318.

<sup>148</sup> *NN*, pp. 83-84.

<sup>150</sup> *PP*, p. 392.

their humanity? . . . The only lasting fictions are those which have spoken to the reader's heart, and not to his eye."<sup>152</sup> James, somewhat indignantly defends himself against a critic of "An International Episode"<sup>153</sup> for showing "Bostonian nymphs" rejecting English dukes "for psychological reasons." "A psychological reason is, to my imagination, an object adorably pictorial,"<sup>154</sup> it is an "adventure" as "it is an incident for a woman to stand up with her hand resting on a table and look out at you in a certain way." But this adventure or incident is "at the same time an expression of character."<sup>155</sup> James would not admit any such thing as an "adventure pure and simple; there is only mine and yours, and his and hers,"<sup>156</sup> an adventure felt and experienced, "felt life."<sup>157</sup> Action and character, incident and motivation, romance and psychology collaborate and cannot be conceived separately. "The soul of a novel is its action"<sup>158</sup> but action may be merely the look of a woman standing up. Action is "*line*, bony structure and palpable, as it were, tense cord." "I like a rope (the rope of the *direction and march of the subject*, the action) pulled, like a taut cable between a steamer and a tug, from beginning to end."<sup>159</sup> He complains of a novel by Hugh Walpole that "*line* (the only thing *I* value in a fiction etc.) is replaced by a vast formless featherbediness"<sup>160</sup> and he objects to Tolstoy for the same reason. Tolstoy is a "wonderful mass of life . . . an immense event, a kind of splendid accident . . . a monster harnessed to his great subject—all human life!—as an elephant might be harnessed."<sup>161</sup> Tolstoy's and Dostoyevsky's novels are "fluid pudding, though not tasteless, because the amount of their own minds and souls in solution in the broth gives it savour and flavour, thanks to the strong, rank quality of their genius and their experience." But he deplores their "lack of composition, their defiance of economy and architecture."<sup>162</sup>

The comments on Tolstoy show that James held a narrow view of form and even kept an untenable divorce between form and substance, form and life-content when confronted with works of

<sup>152</sup> *NR*, p. 22.

<sup>153</sup> In the *Pall Mall Gazette*, see *SL*, p. 74.

<sup>154</sup> *PP*, pp. 401-402.

<sup>155</sup> *FN*, p. 120.

<sup>156</sup> *NR*, p. 25.

<sup>157</sup> *SL*, p. 168.

<sup>158</sup> To Hugh Walpole, May 19, 1912, *SL*, p. 171.

<sup>159</sup> *PP*, p. 393.

<sup>160</sup> *AN*, p. 45.

<sup>161</sup> *SL*, p. 210.

<sup>162</sup> *FN*, p. 228.

art in a different tradition. He obviously did not recognize the complex composition and stylistic mastery of Tolstoy since it was another kind of "form" and "style" than Turgenev's or his own. There was, one must admit, also a curious sentimental streak in James which made him resent the supposed cruelty of the two great Russians and the cynicism of Flaubert and Zola. James preferred Turgenev's maudlin story *Mumu* to Flaubert's *Un Cœur simple*<sup>163</sup> and admired even such an absurdly contrived phantasy as Turgenev's "Phantoms."<sup>164</sup>

But theoretically, James was perfectly aware of the unity of content and form. He complains of "the perpetual clumsy assumption that subject and style are—aesthetically speaking, or in the living work—different and separable things."<sup>165</sup> He often argues that "the grave distinction between substance and form in a really wrought work of art signally breaks down," that it is impossible "to mark any joint or seam," or to "disintegrate a synthesis" such as his own novel *The Awkward Age*.<sup>166</sup> It is the highest praise for him to say of *Madame Bovary* that "the form is in *itself* as interesting, as active, as much of the essence of the subject as the idea, and yet so close is its fit and so inseparable its life that we catch it at no moment on any errand of its own."<sup>167</sup> The harmony of form and substance is James's constant requirement: as "form alone *takes*, and holds and preserves, substance,"<sup>168</sup> while "any claimed independence of 'form' on its part is the most abject of fallacies."<sup>169</sup> This is why James considered translating impossible and disliked being translated. He wrote to a prospective translator most discouragingly: "I feel that in a literary work of the least complexity the very form and texture are the substance itself and that the flesh is indetachable from the bones! Translation is an effort—though a most flattering one!—to *tear* the hapless flesh." He rejoiced that his memoirs, *A Small Boy and Others*, "is locked fast in the golden cage of the *intraduisible*."<sup>170</sup>

"Form" in James means most often composition, architecture, e.g. the right distribution of conversation, narration, and pictorial matter. He finds Howells deficient in it<sup>171</sup> and lauds his own

<sup>163</sup> *PP*, p. 395.

<sup>165</sup> *FN*, p. 229.

<sup>167</sup> *NN*, p. 80.

<sup>169</sup> *NN*, p. 361.

<sup>171</sup> *AE*, p. 155.

<sup>164</sup> *FPN*, p. 215.

<sup>166</sup> *AN*, pp. 115-116.

<sup>168</sup> *SL*, p. 171.

<sup>170</sup> *SL*, p. 107.

*Ambassadors* as “the most proportioned of his productions” alongside *The Portrait of a Lady*, which is “a structure reared with an ‘architectural’ competence.”<sup>172</sup> But often also James contrasts “form” in the sense of composition with “texture” and style. Texture is something else than style. Dumas, George Sand, Trollope “weave a loose web,” while Balzac “weaves a dense one.” The “tissue of his tales is always extraordinarily firm and hard” and even shows “fantastic cohesiveness.”<sup>173</sup> But texture is not style and style is not form. “Madame Sand’s novels have plenty of style, but they have no form. Balzac’s have not a shred of style, but they have a great deal of form” (and, we have been told, texture).<sup>174</sup> But surely “style” is here conceived very narrowly, as Balzac has style (or several styles). It is hard to see how James could deny both style and form to Emerson and find him “a striking exception to the general rule that writings live in the last resort by their form.”<sup>175</sup> Though Emerson’s *Essays* have their compositional principles they struck James as a mere mosaic of desultory sentences: but surely Emerson has an unmistakable and memorable verbal style. James admires style and even “manner” in Stevenson and D’Annunzio.<sup>176</sup> But evidently he has a whole gamut of uses for the term; he can praise George Sand’s style: “That is what it is really to *have* style—when you set about performing the act of life,”<sup>177</sup> where the term means simply the power of creation, of giving life to art, or he can, on the other hand, protest against Flaubert’s worship of style. “Style itself moreover, with all respect to Flaubert, never *totally* beguiles; since even when we are so queerly constituted as to be ninety-nine parts literary we are still a hundredth part something else.”<sup>178</sup>

But in spite of all these shifts of terminology James has an excellent hold on the concept of organic form. He tells us that he delights “in a deep-breathing economy and an organic form,”<sup>179</sup> refers complacently to his own “organic form,”<sup>180</sup> and writes criticism from the very beginning of his career with the concept and metaphor in mind. “A genuine poem is a tree that breaks into blossom and shakes in the wind,” while George Eliot’s *The Spanish Gipsy*

<sup>172</sup> *AN*, p. 52.

<sup>174</sup> *FPN*, p. 180.

<sup>176</sup> *PP*, pp. 139–140; *NN*, p. 255.

<sup>178</sup> *NN*, p. 100.

<sup>180</sup> *AN*, p. 219.

<sup>173</sup> *FPN*, pp. 75–80.

<sup>175</sup> *PP*, p. 32.

<sup>177</sup> *NN*, p. 219.

<sup>179</sup> *AN*, p. 84.

is rather "like a vast mural design in mosaic-work."<sup>181</sup> "A novel," he elaborates the metaphor, "is a living thing, all one and continuous, like any other organism, and in proportion as it lives will it be found, I think, that in each of the parts there is something of each of the other parts."<sup>182</sup>

Unity is a requirement of organic art, but in a proper organistic theory it is unity in variety, an inner, living unity. James recognizes this when he praises Flaubert for being "the devotee of the phrase" which is "properly part of something else that is in turn part of something other, part of a reference, a tone, a passage, a page."<sup>183</sup> He praises *Silas Marner* because it has "that simple, rounded, consummate aspect, that absence of loose ends and gaping issues, which marks a classical work"<sup>184</sup> and is pleased with Arnold's *Essays* for having a definite topic with a beginning, middle, and end while today, on the whole, "a book or an article is looked upon as a kind of Staubbach waterfall, discharging itself into infinite space."<sup>185</sup> But this legitimate demand on all art becomes a denial of different organizations when James tells of his "mortal horror" of two stories in one and compares a novel without a single center to a "wheel without a hub."<sup>186</sup> *Daniel Deronda* is described, in an appreciative dialogue, as a two-center novel<sup>187</sup> and *War and Peace*, he complains, has no "center of the interest."<sup>188</sup> James's criticism of *The Ring and the Book* assumes this same rigid standard: James proposes to retell Browning's story from a single point of view, the consciousness of Caponsacchi.<sup>189</sup> James, one fears, violates here his own rule to grant the artist his theme, as Browning's main interest was precisely in the multiplicity of perspectives from which he told his story several times over.

Unity is not only unity of perspective, but also of tone in James. Reflecting on Balzac's *Curé de Village* James complains of the "fatal break of 'tone,' the one unpardonable sin for the novelist,"<sup>190</sup> about the middle of the book, while he praises Gautier's travel books: "each of his chapters of travel has a perfect tone of its own and that unity of effect which is the secret of the rarest artists."<sup>191</sup>

<sup>181</sup> *VR*, p. 135.

<sup>183</sup> *NN*, p. 93.

<sup>186</sup> *VR*, p. 96.

<sup>187</sup> *PP*, pp. 65 ff.

<sup>188</sup> *NN*, pp. 394-395.

<sup>191</sup> *FPN*, p. 43.

<sup>182</sup> *PP*, p. 392.

<sup>184</sup> *VR*, p. 8.

<sup>186</sup> *AN*, p. 84.

<sup>188</sup> *NN*, p. 329.

<sup>190</sup> *NN*, p. 118.

The analogy to a painting, its "keeping," its harmony, is again in James's mind. "Form," "unity," "tone" create "illusion," the illusion of a "world." Mrs. Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* has "reared a new and arbitrary world over [the reader's] heedless head—a world insidiously inclusive of him (such is the *assoupissement* of his critical sense), complete in every particular."<sup>192</sup> But this illusory world of fiction (and art in general) must be, James feels, a joyous and good world. This is why he chides Turgenev for his gloom and Flaubert for his hatred of the *bourgeoisie* and his tortured martyrdom for style. "We hold to the good old belief that the presumption, in life, is in favour of the brighter side . . . . The artist . . . should have at least tried his best to be cheerful . . . . We value most the 'realists' who have an ideal of delicacy and the elegiacs who have an ideal of joy."<sup>193</sup> James could, in his early years, say even somewhat crudely: "To be completely great, a work of art must lift up the reader's heart," and "Life is dispiriting; art is inspiring."<sup>194</sup> Similarly James remonstrates with Vernon Lee about her novel, *Miss Brown*, that "*life* is less criminal, less obnoxious, less objectionable, less crude, more *bon enfant*, more mixed and casual, and even in its most offensive manifestations, more *pardonable*"<sup>195</sup> than it appears in her novel. Flaubert's intense hatreds surprise and distress James. "How can art be so genuine and yet so unconsolated, so unhumorous, so unsociable? How can it be such a curse without being also a blessing? . . . Why, in short, when the struggle is success, should the success not be at last serenity?"<sup>196</sup> James cannot share Flaubert's "puerile dread of the grocer, the *bourgeois*. . . . That worthy citizen ought never to have kept a poet from dreaming."<sup>197</sup> *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, James felt, "is surely, in the extreme juvenility of its main idea, one of the oddest productions for which a man who had lived long in the world was ever responsible."<sup>198</sup> Flaubert's hatred of his public was so excessive that it amounted to a betrayal of art. "He hovered forever at the public door . . . . He should at least have listened at the chamber of the soul."<sup>199</sup> The tone of self-consolation is obvious; James was deeply discouraged by the growing indifference to his own work; he retired more and

<sup>192</sup> NR, p. 154.<sup>194</sup> NR, pp. 225-226.<sup>196</sup> EL, p. 126.<sup>198</sup> EL, p. 159.<sup>193</sup> FPN, pp. 249-250.<sup>195</sup> SL, p. 206.<sup>197</sup> EL, p. 146.<sup>199</sup> EL, pp. 149-150.

more into the chamber of the soul and hoped only vaguely that the spread of the reading public, especially in the United States, would lead to the rise of "individual publics positively more sifted and evolved than anywhere else" which would then "contain shoals of fish rising to more delicate bait,"<sup>200</sup> such as, presumably, his own novels offered. The prophecy, in a manner, has been fulfilled and James has today his devoted public and acute analysts who have risen to his bait.

James, in spite of his awareness of evil, preserved an ideal of optimism, of serenity, of trust in nature and human nature, a final almost Olympian perspective. This temper, so curiously similar to his brother's and father's, is also at the roots of his aesthetics, which is, in its basic positions, organistic, illusionist, i.e. asking the artist to create a world which is somehow like life and to create it on the analogy of nature in order to support man in a belief in the moral and social order of the universe. On these two points, aesthetics and the general temper of serenity, the parallel to Goethe seems striking. (James's own optimism was rudely shaken only by the outbreak of the First World War.)<sup>201</sup> There is no need to make much of a direct contact since Arnold and (in parts) Sainte-Beuve achieved a similar combination, even though James seems to me nearer in temper and aesthetic doctrine to Goethe than either of these models. James, we must remember, had praised Goethe as the "great critic"; and he had early written a review of *Wilhelm Meister* in which he voiced his admiration, in spite of many reservations regarding Goethe's novelistic skill, for Goethe's power of creating human beings, for the "luminous atmosphere of justice which fills the book," for his plan: *non flere, non indignari, sed intelligere*.<sup>202</sup> James later chided the younger Dumas for his violently nationalistic and moralistic preface to a French translation of *Faust*, proclaiming his agreement with Goethe's "immense respect for reality," and admiration for his use of facts, "the mysterious music he drew from them."<sup>203</sup>

Intelligence, reality, "nature" which is also form and illusion in art, the joy of art and its civilizing power, are also James's preoccupations.

<sup>200</sup> *AE*, pp. 200-201.

<sup>201</sup> See letter to W. Roughhead, September 30, 1914, *SL*, p. 220.

<sup>202</sup> *North American Review*, CI, 281-285 (July, 1865), in *LER*, p. 271.

<sup>203</sup> See *Nation*, XVII, 292-294 (October 30, 1873), in *LER*, p. 117.



pations. James alone in his time and place in the English-speaking world holds fast to the insights of organistic aesthetics and thus constitutes a bridge from the early nineteenth century to modern criticism.